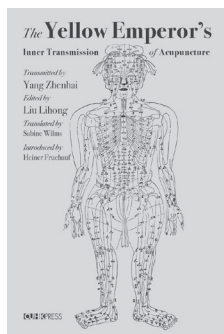


Reviews



The Yellow Emperor's Inner Transmission of Acupuncture

by Yang Zhenhai
Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, hardback, £73.00

Like so many in our profession, I have long grappled with the problem of understanding the medicine more deeply than the 'standard model' interpretation we usually get to begin our acupuncture careers. So, I jumped at the chance to read and review a new text that promises to plug the reader into the secrets of 'Huangdi acupuncture'.

Classical Chinese Medicine has now emerged as a publishing genre, with each author supplying a slightly different take on the early traditions. We have seen elucidations of the *Shanghan Lun* style, of early cosmology, on time and space as well as the Han synthesis that sought to unify insights on the *dao* of nature. The editor of this book, Liu Lihong, has himself published a weighty text that seeks to clarify the classical medical traditions (*Classical Chinese Medicine* – CUHK Press). The calibre of this new book is also signalled by the presence of two other names on the cover; it was translated by the redoubtable Sabine Wilms and benefits from an introduction by Heiner Fruehauf. I will start by acknowledging what they have brought to this work.

Sabine Wilms, who herself has contributed to the classical genre with her remarkable *Dancing With Elephants*, conveys the author's easy narrative style in a way that is seamless and eminently readable. You really would not guess this was a translation of a Chinese text. Heiner Fruehauf is known for his encyclopaedic knowledge of the early medical tradition. In his introduction he makes a heroic attempt, in just eighteen pages, to convey the flavour of the scholarship that emerged in the Warring States period and Han dynasty. He meets this challenge by presenting aspects of the early tradition that help us make sense of the ideas presented by Yang Zhenhai in the main text, including; cosmology, *yijing*, *dao*, resonance, balance, harmony and the concepts of centre (中) and uprightness (正). Succinct and well referenced to classical sources, the skill of Heiner's introduction lies in the way he highlights the underlying intent of the book, letting us know how we gain insight by internalising the ideas behind the classical terminology of this medicine:

While other ancient fields of knowledge have become mere objects of anthropological and historical investigation, Chinese medicine is still a living practice after more than two millennia. While it benefits greatly from the wealth of experience accumulated during its extensive lifetime, modern practitioners both in China and the West are faced by the predicament that the terminology of their field has lost much of its theoretical clarity and, consequently, clinical precision!

In the first of his three chapters, Yang himself opens by praising the power of acupuncture. Taking the early 20th century *li-fa-fang-yao* (理法方药, principles-methods-formulas-medicines) perspective, he includes acupuncture as a *yao*-medicine and suggests that the most esoteric, fundamental and difficult to convey aspects are the *li*-principles. He makes the case that these principles are traditionally conveyed by transmission through a master-disciple relationship; later in the second chapter Yang writes: '... without transmission everything becomes impossible or pointless to talk about ...' For sure, we can learn many important things through guidance from an old hand - absorbing intangibles by osmosis, things that go beyond the simple 'product learning' of education theory. It may be overly romantic, though, to suggest that this was *the* method of history. Chinese medicine was also taught in formal university settings during ancient times, and mentors often taught multiple students in what might be seen as mini colleges, akin to martial arts dojos today. One downside of the guru-aspirant approach is the risk that the student is taken in by a charlatan, and then transmits their teachings further down the generations. There is a debate to be had about the relative merits of formal college teaching versus guru-aspirant transmission. The answer - and a challenge for TCM colleges - is of course, both!

Yang discusses the problem of real world clinical practice as a constantly moving target, the *jingluo* and their *qi* alter through time and space and that 'guiding' (*daoyin*) and yin-yang thinking provide orientation. Acupuncture, we are told, is simultaneously very complicated because of this, and at

the same time very simple; needling is just ‘pulling out thorns, wiping away filth, untangling knots and bursting through blockages.’ Doing this, the author states, is both easy and difficult.

In the second of his three chapters Yang details the Confucian outlook on society and human behaviour, examining ideals such as compassion (*ren* 仁) before touring through a gamut of other core ideas from the Zhou and Han dynasties. Pointing out that this is not a textbook of Chinese medicine, he looks at number metaphysics, drawing on *sancai* theory (三才, the three powers of Heaven-Earth-Man). He tells us that the ancient *sancai* concept was doubled up into yin-yang pairs to provide the *liuhe* (six channels or conformations). Yang then teases out its meaning, including a useful discussion of ministerial and sovereign fire. Much of this material will strike a chord with those who studied in the UK under Dr van Buren in the ‘70s and ‘80s; here we have similar material presented in an understandable and scholarly way with explanations of characters and illustrative classical quotes.

The plot then thickens as page by page Yang rides some of my own favourite hobby horses. He reveals one of the key ideas of classical medical thinking, what Yang calls ‘searching for identical qi’ in order to induce a response. Essentially this discussion is about resonance (*ganying* 感应) – the way that like responds to like – and how medical efficacy comes from identifying exactly where, when and how to intervene for the best response. Later, in relation to this idea Yang discusses *Yijing* hexagram 31, *xian* 咸 – a character with a range of meanings, from salty to stimulation. The addition of the heart-feeling radical (*xin* 心) to *xian* 咸 gives the character *gan* 感, which means ‘to be affected by’. As with so much in this book, here is something really worth pondering on – because human agency in medicine,

teaching and pretty much everything else is about influence, and this happens most elegantly when we follow the principles of resonance. Later Yang uses the same term *xian* in the context of teaching, saying ‘after *xian*-stimulation there is understanding’, meaning that traditional teaching is done by *xian* – evoking a response in the student so that it is sensed rather than simply being an intellectual understanding. This is such an important aspect of learning, one that first struck me as a beginner after I had spent some time in clinic with a brilliant bodyworker (the UK’s Tony Brewer). Just by being there, sensing his body language, the purposefulness of his manual enquiry of each patient, I acquired a little of his ‘knack’. There is knowledge and there is also a deeper knowing, as Yang says later on: ‘Chinese culture does not care how much knowledge you accumulate but only whether you understand or not.’

Given his informal style we can forgive Yang his occasional stream-of-consciousness forays into areas such as big bang cosmology. We soon get back on the classical track with Yang explaining that the spiritual essence that lies at the heart of Huangdi acupuncture is about ‘centredness and harmony’. Explaining this with reference to yin-yang, he discusses the importance of the characters *zhong* 中 (centre), and *ben* 本 and *mo* 末 (root and branch) and relates these ideas to the opening words of Confucius’s classic *Daxue* (Great Learning): ‘Things have roots and branches, affairs have ends and beginnings. By knowing the before and after we approximate the dao.’

In a polemical moment Yang tells us that he sees modern biomedical diagnostics as an unhelpful distraction in the practice of Chinese medicine, and makes the case for treatment based on classical pattern differentiation. Practitioners are urged to follow the *Shanghan Lun* advice to ‘observe the patients pulse and signs, know what

has been violated and why there is counterflow, and treat the patient in accordance with the pattern.’ This was good advice in the Eastern Han dynasty when the choice was between the methods of scholar physicians and those of simple folk mendicants. For all its deficiencies, biomedical science has power and does provide important understandings that the East Asian tradition was unable to encompass. So yes, staying true to classical principles can provide access to the full value of authentic practice, but at the same time, no, because we live in the modern world where choices and understandings have gone beyond those of the Han dynasty.

Next we get some detailed discussions on *wuxing* (five elements) and the centrality of the Stomach and Spleen as the pivot of health, and on *zheng-* and *xieqi* – which he represents interestingly as ‘alignment’ or ‘misalignment’. After the theoretical discussions we begin to move towards turning ideas into practicalities. Yang points to a key aspect of Huangdi acupuncture methodology represented by the characters *zhendui* (*zhen* 針 means needle, *dui* 對 means the opposite of a pair of things), or needling opposites. We can read this in the modern standard rulebook: needle the left for illnesses on the right, needle above for below, yin for yang, front for back, and so on. Yang says that it is not that the direct approach – say of needling an affected shoulder – is wrong, simply that *zhendui* acupuncture is more in line with the Huangdi classical style. This he says is a big *Suwen* secret.

... *zhendui* is the most abstruse and at the same time most to-the-point trick of the trade, the ancient family inheritance and the Yellow Emperor’s Inner Needling! ... when we are able to find the precisely matching opposite we have found the entryway to acupuncture ...

Do this, alongside the idea of 'attracting identical qi' (based on the principles of resonance) he says, and 'you will not go wrong once in ten thousand treatments'.

Another classical principle he shares is 'grasping the middle with sincere impartiality', an idea that comes from Kongfuzi (Confucius). Yang asserts that this 'doctrine of the mean' is the un-transmitted secret of Chinese culture; by means of an empty mind we can grasp both the yin and the yang of a problem and then sense the middle where resolution can be found.

In the final section of the text Yang moves into practical acupuncture method, taking the principles outlined earlier and showing how his version of Huangdi acupuncture is applied. Some of this will be familiar to most of us: using the principle of opposites he discusses with examples the use of points below to treat above, points on the back to treat the front, and so on. Using the 'similars' principle (the idea that things resonate when they are similar) alongside *sancai* (three powers) theory, Yang demonstrates the way that he believes scholars practised acupuncture in Huangdi's time. He offers his interpretation of what I learned in acupuncture school as 'main points' – 'Lung 7 (lie que) – main point for the head and neck' and 'Bladder 40 (wei zhong) – main point for the back' and so on. He explains the clinical use of these points in the context of the principles and explains the degree to which this tells us when they apply and when they do not. For example, he tells us that point *Weizhong* is less likely to be effective for back pain located on the midline or lateral to the Bladder channel and suggests more appropriate points based on Huangdi acupuncture.

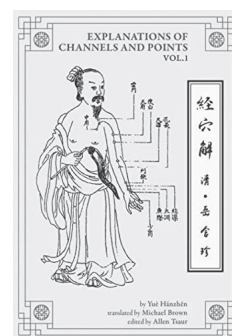
Overall, Yang provides a level of interpretation that is way beyond the standard college version and does so in a way that rather satisfyingly connects an understanding of Han

dynasty scholarly principles with practical acupuncture. So this book will, I believe, take most readers into a new level of understanding. The fact is, though, that the *Suwen* is not itself a practical manual of acupuncture, and other interpretations are possible. Yang chooses not to say much about the practical uses of *wuxing* acupuncture, nor the qi mechanism interpretation that sees therapeutics in terms of ascent-descent, entering-leaving, opening-closing and accumulation-dispersal. Some aspects are mentioned but not detailed: *zangxiang* (zang manifestation) theory, qi-following (顺 *shun*), rebellion (逆 *ni*) and chaos (乱 *luan*) or the *xiezheng* (pathogen-normal) dynamic. This is understandable. It is difficult to encompass the whole depth of Huangdi medical thinking in a text that focusses on acupuncture insights but does not claim to be an actual textbook of acupuncture.

All in all, this is an interesting read and makes the subject as accessible as is possible given the profundity of some of the ideas discussed. More than that, it is an essential read. There are a lot of key insights into the classical medical tradition here, many of which are not adequately dealt with in typical basic training. Yang's book will lift the understanding of many to another level. Yes, Yang sometimes offers tantalising classic quotes but sometimes leaves them hanging, not quite explained. Yes, it would be good, as Yang suggests, to penetrate to the pivotal point of an issue, examine 'left and right' or the 'past and future', but sometimes it feels we are left guessing how to actually do this. Yang identifies *Yijing* Hexagram 31 as key, which includes the line 'the junzi watches his body responses and so knows the whole world'. Whilst this sounds impressive, behind these words lie hidden the cognitive switches that ancient scholars were utilising. How do we access these ourselves? The

sagely answer would of course be, 'You will need to work to understand it, your *Yi* and your *Shen* are beyond words!' Traditionally I suspect the master might well say 'If you can't understand it perhaps you should consider following some other life path!' Nevertheless, dear colleagues, I warmly recommended Yang's book.

Charles Buck



Explanations of Channels and Points (Volume 1)

by Yue Hanzhen, translated by Michael Brown, edited by Allen Tsaur

Purple Cloud Press, softback, £49.00

A couple of years ago, I met a fellow Chinese medical practitioner who was studying Mandarin in Taiwan. He stated that we Westerners were living at a great time to be practising Chinese medicine, due to the wealth of English translations of classical medical texts that continue to be published. Now, with the release of *Explanations of Channels and Points* translated by Michael Brown, another classical text can be added to this list.

If like me you had never heard of this Qing dynasty book, the author Yue Hanzhen (岳含珍) lived during the late Ming and into the early Qing dynasty. He was well known for his medical skills, especially in acupuncture. During this tumultuous

time, he spent a good deal of his early years in the military where he achieved great success and attained high office. He was then able to spend the rest of his life devoted to his passions of scholarship and medicine.

Explanations of Channels and Points is based on one of the most well-known and influential books on classical acupuncture, the *Great Compendium of Acupuncture and Moxibustion* (針灸大成). It also includes pieces of other acupuncture texts where applicable. Yue Hanzhen's book takes the knowledge of the *Great Compendium* and expands on it with more details and commentaries. In this publication, Michael Brown and Allen Tsaur have included extensive research in order to help us understand it.

Each channel has a chapter devoted to it, which describes the primary and sinew channel pathways, along with a summary of points and diseases of the channel. The pathways and points will be very familiar to most readers. However, the diseases of the channel may not be so familiar and there are many indications that are not included in most acupuncture textbooks. For instance, although frequent urination is typically associated with the Kidney and Bladder channels, 'frequent urination that occurs with the onset of yawning' is associated with the Lung channel. 'This is because the Lung is the mother of the Kidneys, when the mother is diseased, it will reach the child.' This makes perfect sense and, yet, it is not what many would consider when seeing frequent urination.

This brings up another fascinating part of this book. It discusses and explains many aspects of the five phases, interior/exterior pairings and superior/inferior connections, and their relationship to channels and individual points. For example, take the point Dadu SP-2: '... When the eyes become dizzy, the liver has also become diseased, so drain the mother and fire [point] of the spleen

in order to descend the counterflow qi of the spleen.' Or, moving on to Taibai SP-3, one of the indications of which is 'lumbar pain, difficulty defecating ... [these] are diseases of the kidney. These are signs of earth restraining water and causing qi stagnation, therefore, in this way, drain the earth point of the spleen, in order to disinhibit the kidney qi.'

When describing individual points, each section starts with its name (and any alternatives), its location and appropriate needling method. Yue Hanzhen then explains the name of the point and how this is related to its function. The focus of the text is the diseases treatable by the points, which are separated into the principal diseases treated by each point as well as indications organised according to the five phases. A Lung point, for instance, may have sections on Lung diseases of the Lung, Heart diseases of the Lung and Spleen diseases of the Lung. This information gives us a glimpse into how Yue Hanzhen and other doctors of his time analysed diseases and understood point usage.

The real highlight of this book comes in the numerous explanations and commentaries by Yue Hanzhen himself. He explains the theory behind the point indications in a very fluid and clear way. For indications that are straightforward, he does not go into much detail. However, for others that are less easy to grasp, he lays out analysis of the point mechanics. I had great pleasure reading through these analyses and contemplating how to use them in the clinic. One such example that stuck with me was Quepen ST-12, which is indicated for water swelling (i.e. oedema). When I first saw this, I wondered why a point above the clavicle would be used to treat oedema in the body. The author goes on to explain: 'This sign is due to qi stagnation of the stomach; when the stomach is unable to transport water, it starts to become water swelling.

Choose this point in order to dissipate the upper stagnation of qi. When qi is dissipated from above, water will be able to flow from below.'

In regards to the translation and organisation of the book, it is very apparent that Michael Brown and Allen Tsaur have done extensive research. Evident in the footnotes and elsewhere, this research will help those not well versed in the associated texts. Chinese readers will appreciate that the text is multilingual and that each Chinese section is concise and immediately followed by its English translation. This makes lookup very quick and easy. Finally, as the authors follow the *Practical Dictionary of Chinese Medicine* for their English translation of medical terms, looking up unfamiliar terms or searching for more information is very straightforward.

It is good to see a new translation of a classic acupuncture text available, especially one that covers areas that other acupuncture texts do not. As practitioners, we should always be looking to expand our knowledge and find more effective means to treat our patients. For those interested in classical approaches to acupuncture, I would definitely recommend reading this book.

David Edsall



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